

COLONIAL REPRESENTATION: ARUBA'S PAST IN DUTCH CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AND POTENTIAL EFFECTS



*Figure 1. Statue of Queen Wilhelmina surrounded by the Dutch & Aruban Flags
(Aruba's History & Culture - Caribbean Cultural Travel, n.d.)*

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31 MAY 2024

Acknowledgement

This thesis could not have been completed without the support and guidance of several people. Therefore, I would like to express my gratitude to all who have contributed to the completion of this research project.

I am immensely grateful to all my research participants who generously shared their time, notions, and experiences. Without their willingness to engage in dialogue, this study would not have been possible. Their invaluable insights were paramount for this research project to come to fruition.

I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Sandhya Fuchs, for her unwavering support, guidance, and encouragement throughout this journey. Her expertise, insightful feedback, and patience have been indispensable in shaping this final research project.

Heartfelt thanks also goes to my family for their unwavering support throughout my entire academic journey. Their encouragement has been a constant source of motivation and perseverance.

Finally, to Aruba, an island commonly known as “One Happy Island”. I hope to shed light on some of the deeper layers of the island’s culture and history, highlighting that there is much more than meets the eye.

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1 Introduction: Towards a united future?

We live in a world that has been shaped by colonialism. The people we meet, the food we eat, the languages we speak, and the current power relations in society are all remnants of this colonial legacy (*Onze Koloniale Erfenis*, n.d.). Hence, the importance of learning about this part of history, as it helps illuminate persistent social and political inequalities in the contemporary global world order. The Netherlands specifically played a pivotal role throughout European imperialism. They actively participated in and contributed to the expansion and establishment of various colonial territories, one of them being the Caribbean island of Aruba (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2023a).

Remembering and learning about these pages of Dutch history is essential, as the way we remember the colonial past influences our understanding of the postcolonial present (Engelenhoven, 2022, p. 14). Yet, up until recently much of this history has remained underexposed, especially Aruba's role in the matter (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2023a & Pakhuis de Zwijger, n.d.). Therefore, as a means of enhancing and kickstarting this process, the National Commemoration of the History of Dutch Slavery was initiated on July 1st, 2023, marking the beginning of the Commemoration Year of the History of Slavery, which will conclude on July 1st, 2024 (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2023).

Leading up to this year, Prime Minister Mark Rutte apologized on behalf of the Dutch government for the country's role in the history of slavery on November 19th, 2022. This apology was broadcast live in the Netherlands and the Caribbean parts of the Kingdom. At the time, various ministers were present on the islands to extend their sincere and targeted apologies. In Aruba, State Secretary van der Brug acknowledged the pain suffered on the island and expressed gratitude for the efforts made by groups and individuals seeking recognition of this history (Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid, 2022). During this speech, the State Secretary referred to the colonial division of roles within the then Empire. Aruba specifically did not have the resources to establish large-scale plantations, however, this does not negate the fact that the island hosted enslaved people. He also noted that much remains unknown about what exactly occurred at the time, thereby extending a hand on behalf of the Dutch government in support of initiatives aimed at enriching knowledge and understanding of this past. Ultimately hoping to make this knowledge accessible "So that people in Aruba who want to do so can gain easier and better insight into their own family history" (Van der Brug, 2022).

This thesis builds on the foundational matter of enriching our understanding of this part of history, specifically concerning Aruba's role. As a student enrolled in the bachelor's program in Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, I am undertaking this ethnographic research project to explore the postcolonial memory of Aruba in the Netherlands. By examining the visibility and representation of Aruba's colonial history within Dutch cultural institutions, this thesis aims to unravel its complexities and foster the inclusion of Aruba in discussions on Dutch colonial history. This is particularly important because, noticeably, much of the emphasis has typically centered on Suriname and, to a lesser extent, Curaçao. Aruba's past, however, often takes a marginalized position in discourse on Dutch colonial history in the Netherlands (Pakhuis de Zwijger, n.d.). Therefore, if the goal of this Year of Commemoration is to enhance awareness of this part of history by promoting inclusive representation, this thesis will make a critical contribution to this endeavor, starting with Aruba.

1.1 Research question and sub questions

To properly discern this, the research project was based on the following central research question:

- How is Aruba's colonial past remembered and represented in Dutch cultural institutions?

Moreover, the research process was guided by the following sub questions:

- What role did the Netherlands play in the colonial history of Aruba?
- Which aspects of Aruba's colonial past are highlighted or silenced/forgotten within Dutch cultural institutions?
- To what extent does the Aruban population in the Netherlands feel that their history during Dutch colonial rule is recognized or represented in Dutch historical discourse?
- How is Dutch colonial rule and violence remembered among Arubans?

These sub questions provide a structure within which the empirical data will be presented.

The first sub question will provide a historical background, allowing one to understand the colonial relationship between Aruba and the Netherlands. Here, some of the complexities in relation to what is currently known and presented on this aspect of history will be introduced.

The second sub question will reveal what can currently be observed within Dutch cultural institutions, thereby highlighting to what extent Aruba's colonial history is represented, or not.

The third sub question delineates to what extent Arubans feel that their colonial history is recognized and represented. Moreover, uncovering why Arubans believe that their history needs to be part of discourse, thereby providing suggestions for further representation.

The last sub question centers on the notion of collectivity and explores how this aspect of Aruban history is remembered among Arubans. Specifically, it investigates whether this part of history is remembered at all and, if so, how. Consequently, this point of inquiry illuminates the place of colonial history within the historical consciousness of Arubans.

Overall, these sub-questions will provide insights into the varying perspectives of their shared history, revealing its role in their collective memory and its connection to identity formation.

1.2 Scientific Relevance

This thesis will fill gaps in current discourse on Dutch colonial history by providing insights into how Aruba's postcolonial memory is constructed among Arubans and the extent to which this shapes their collective memory and historical consciousness. Considering history's role in the formation of collective memory, uncovering, and highlighting overlooked parts of history can significantly influence a society's collective memory (Klaś, 2015, p. 109).

Moreover, given that Aruba remains part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, it is imperative that all voices are comprehensively represented when depicting Dutch history, as intended in the Commemoration Year of the History of Slavery. Therefore, ensuring that Aruba is represented within Dutch historical discourse is essential. This study may provide a new lens through which one can analyze the influence of postcolonial memory on identity. By illuminating how Aruba's colonial past is addressed in contemporary Dutch cultural institutions, this research provides a framework for further exploration of overlooked facets within Dutch colonial histories.

1.3 Social Relevance

By highlighting underexposed aspects of Dutch history, this study will contribute to a more inclusive representation of the shared history within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, ensuring that Aruba's role in the past is further represented. This allows for a more nuanced analysis of how historical dynamics have influenced the ways in which contemporary Dutch society is shaped (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2023). Remnants of the past are still visible in current society.

Therefore, discussing the past and highlighting what has been overlooked or forgotten can generate greater understanding in Dutch society. In doing so, we will not only commemorate past suffering and pain but also acknowledge today's resilience (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2023). Thus, this study aims to cultivate a more informed and perhaps more empathetic Dutch society while providing Arubans with greater recognition.

2 Theoretical Framework

When discussing postcolonial memory, questions often revolve around how this history should be remembered, its current remembrance, and the potential social and political effects of memorialization, with answers often reflecting individuals' personal identities (Engelenhoven, 2022, p. 14). For Aruba specifically, much of its colonial history has remained sidelined to the point where it has almost become a forgotten page in Aruban history (Alofs, 2013, p. 11). This creates a complex situation regarding the representation of the shared past between the Netherlands and Aruba in cultural institutions.

A historical understanding of one's roots and an awareness of the way this past is represented is crucial, as it can provide a sense of empowerment (Nava et al., 2021, p. 88). To explore how Aruba's colonial history is represented in Dutch cultural institutions, I will use theories of historical consciousness, collective memory, and memorability along with the concepts of silence, recognizability, cultural heritage, and identity. This approach aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved and their impact on Arubans.

2.1 Historical Consciousness, Historiography & Collective Memory

To start, I used the theory of historical consciousness to discern how Arubans remember this part of their history. This theory, prominent in anthropology, explores how societies engage with and interpret the past (Sutton, 2013, p. 1169). According to Charles Stewart (2017), historical consciousness refers to the set of general accepted assumptions made by a society that reflect how that particular society perceives and understands the past, present, and future (p. 1). It encompasses the historical information that people know, and the narratives from the past that have remained in their consciousness over time. These assumptions influence how individuals, and their respective communities understand history and their role within it. He explains that what is considered part of a society's historical consciousness is not static, rather open to fluctuation over time (Stewart, 2017, p. 2).

Furthermore, the narratives presented as part of a community's historical consciousness can be based on various sources. On the one hand, there are narratives that are maintained by professional historiography, the writing and understanding of history (Hirsch, 2021, p. 1). Here, professional historiography functions according to the Enlightenment ideas of causation and

progress, maintaining a linear historical consciousness through a chronological view. As such, allowing academic scholars to gather data that allows them to understand the development of societies over time. On the other hand, the narratives may stem from more local sources, such as: communal traditions, imaginative speculation, or personal memory (Stewart, 2017, p. 1). Therefore, the documented histories gathered by scholars may sometimes clash with the cherished and shared notions, often understood as “collective memory”. These memories do not always align with the evidence-based data. Yet, they maintain a strong position in the shaping of a community’s understanding of their history (Stewart, 2017, p. 2).

To understand how Aruba’s colonial history is represented, or perhaps less so, one needs to take a look at this contested intersection. What is part of Dutch and Aruban historical consciousness influences and interacts with what is considered part of their collective memory. Collective memory describes the process of remembering, which significantly impacts a society’s collective identity. This process generally occurs in and through culture (Engelenhoven, 2022, p. 14). Anthropologist Carol Kidron (2016) explains that the basic premise of collective memory lies in the notion that memory expands beyond the realm of the individual mind and its own private recollections of the past. Instead, it can be interpreted as a continuously evolving collective social artifact, where individual, social, and collective memories intertwine. This notion upholds that memory is culturally constructed, mediated, and framed through both cultural artifacts and social institutions (Kidron, 2016).

Thus, history plays an important role in shaping a society’s collective memory (Engelenhoven, 2022, p. 14). Discussions about postcolonial memory are not solely about the past, as they can have a significant influence on the present. Memory scholar Astrid Erll (2011) explains that collective memories are not simply a reflection of the past, they also reflect present-day interests and requirements of the individual or group who are remembering in the present (p. 8). However, as mentioned, this process does not always occur without friction. Discussion can emerge on how to remember the past, as memories in relation to the colonial past can influence people’s current collective identities (Engelenhoven, 2022, p. 14). Essentially, what is remembered corresponds to both an individual’s self-image as well as to the interests of the group at large. Therefore, discussing what is part of a group’s historical consciousness regarding their colonial history, and its legitimacy, can influence how people perceive their postcolonial present.

Postcolonial memory can therefore be understood as part of a society's collective memory (Engelenhoven, 2022, p. 14).

Collective memory and its contestations are addressed through various methods, including media, public deliberation, and educational curricula. Cultural representations, such as documentaries, novels, or museum exhibitions, also play a role (Engelenhoven, 2022, p. 14). Jaroslaw Kłás (2015) defines these as vehicles of memory, stating that they assign meaning to the past, thereby influencing collective memory (p. 114). He explains that institutions established to protect and preserve memory are crucial vehicles of memory, thereby highlighting the importance of cultural institutions when focusing on postcolonial memory (Kłás, 2015, p. 114). Researching what is presented in these institutions is imperative as they represent what is considered memorable, but more importantly, what is not.

Collective memory encompasses a process of inclusion and exclusion as it determines the boundaries between those who share similar perceptions of the past and those who do not. Therefore, within discourse regarding postcolonial memory, this process can result in the marginalization of individuals stemming from a postcolonial background. Hence, this research aims to understand how Aruba's colonial past is represented in Dutch cultural institutions, providing insights into how this part of Dutch history is remembered and whether Arubans feel represented, or not.

2.2 Memorability & Recognizability

Given that the premise of this research is centered on Aruba's colonial history and its representation in Dutch cultural institutions, it is important to ascertain the extent to which this past is considered memorable in the first place. As such, the theory of memorability is used to discern how this past is remembered by Dutch and Aruban individuals alike, and how it currently is being represented. According to Paul Bijl (2012), memorability refers to the extent of which the past is considered memorable for a particular society (p. 442). More specifically, the ease with which certain historical frames are remembered. To further this train of thought, Bijl (2012) builds on Judith Butler's (pronouns they/them) (2016) notion of recognizability (p. 444).

In their book *Frames of war*, Butler (2016) uses the concept of recognizability which delineates the general conditions that prepare or mold a subject for recognition (p. 31). These conditions encompass the general terms, notions, and norms that contribute to defining an

individual as a recognizable subject. This process precedes the actual act of recognition but is not flawless. Errors or unanticipated results may arise during the formation of a recognizable subject, potentially leading to the exclusion of individuals who do not conform to set norms, thus challenging the concept's universal application. Norms are historically constituted and maintained by social mechanisms of power, which are articulated through 'frames', including media or common discourse, meaning that they are open to change over time (Butler, 2016, p. 31).

Considering that recognizability precedes or enables the act of recognition, Bijl (2012) explains that memorability facilitates the act of remembrance (p. 451). He builds on the notion of frames, which according to Butler (2016) 'contain, convey, and determine what is seen', making them both crucial for recognizability and memorability (p. 35). These frames are dynamic and evolve over time. Therefore, though they might provide particular ways of interpretation, they are not absolute, meaning that they can be challenged by phenomena that do not conform to their established understandings (Bijl, 2012, p. 451). This is important to consider when studying postcolonial memory as what is considered memorable and recognizable ultimately becomes part of the historical narrative. Therefore, functioning as a tool to understand whether Aruba's colonial history is considered recognizable and identify what aspects of Aruban history in particular are memorable.

2.3 Silence

The concept of silence has gained traction amongst anthropologists and historians, as many seek to understand it through more in-depth engagement (Dragojlović & Samuels, 2021, p. 417). It plays an important role in our social world, harboring an array of affects, meanings, and untold stories that resonate with those who can relate in various ways. However, silence can also serve as a form of oppression by excluding particular ideas and/or individuals, preventing speech, visibility, or acknowledgement of thoughts (Dragojlović & Samuels, 2021, p. 417).

In his book *Silencing the Past*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), discerns the ways in which power structures influence the production of historical narratives (p. xxiii). He argues that historical narratives are created and reinforced by unequal power structures that contain "bundles of silences" (Trouillot, 1995, p. 27). These bundles contain certain knowledge and experiences that are deemed insignificant and are thus never documented in archives. Ultimately, becoming excluded from the historical narrative (Roseberry, 1997, p. 926). He explains that these silences

are not confined to academic histories and archives but extended to how societies remember their past, share stories, and determine historical significance. Therefore, countering this silence requires people to recognize how they interpret narratives, drawing attention to historical legacies that may be incomplete (Miles, 2019, p. 258).

This is essential for understanding how Aruba's colonial history is represented, or not, in Dutch cultural institutions, as these institutions can be holders of these bundles of silence. In fact, research conducted by Ximena Vial Lecaros (2022) in the Chilean National Historical Museum indicates how silence on the indigenous Mapuche community influences the collective memory of the country (p. 153). By not including them in the narrative of the museum, and prioritizing colonial history, the Mapuche are stripped of their contemporary experience, thereby presenting them as something pertaining to the past. Considering that museums are perceived as cultural authorities, it is important that they reflect multivocality, as to ensure that more voices are represented (Lecaros, 2022, p. 162).

2.4 Cultural Heritage & Identity

Cultural heritage refers to a variety of elements, including places such as sites, neighborhoods, and landscapes; objects that may be managed by locals or exhibited in museums after removal; and cultural practices such as rituals (Salemink, 2021, p. 424). Anthropologists extensively study cultural heritage, placing it within broader cultural, social, religious, political, and economic processes. They examine heritage across different spatial and temporal dimensions, focusing on the processes through which sites and/or objects *become* heritage as determined by various community and institutional parties (Salemink, 2021, p. 424).

Furthermore, cultural heritage is connected to identity, as referring to something as heritage implies a particular claim, either ontological or proprietary (Salemink, 2021, p. 424). A study on cultural heritage in the Dutch Caribbean islands of the coast of Venezuela indicated that the role of heritage and heritage policies have shifted over time, but also differed per island (Stipriaan, Alofs, & Guadeloupe, 2023, p. 11). Heritage is not static; it is open to change and development.

In fact, heritage, much like people, travels. This is most apparent in The Kingdom of the Netherlands, which stretches over both European and Caribbean soil. Its inhabitants share a passport, affording them the ability to move between these territories (Oostindie & Stipriaan,

2021, p. 1). The study highlighted notable ambivalence regarding heritage and identification, suggesting that cultural and historical heritage significantly shape national identity. Here, heritage encompasses both tangible and intangible elements of a states' past, which are publicly preserved, promoted, and cherished (Stipriaan, Alofs, & Guadeloupe, 2023, p. 17).

These forms of heritage have proven to be highly significant as they influenced processes of identity formation (Franken, 2021, p. 19). This is a crucial entry point, as cultural heritage serves as a means to represent a country's history. Researching which facets of Aruba's cultural heritage are displayed in Dutch cultural institutions enhances our understanding of its portrayal in the Netherlands. Furthermore, it offers insights into how Arubans perceive, or overlook, this representation, and whether they consider it an accurate reflection of their identity. Moreover, it provides valuable insights into how cultural heritage shapes the Aruban identity (Hodder, 2010, p. 863).

3 Methodology

3.1 Research participants

This research project spanned four months, from February to May 2024. Given the focus, it exclusively involved Aruban participants who had lived on the island and later moved to the Netherlands, or who regularly visited the island. Some participants have professional backgrounds in the cultural or academic sectors in both the Netherlands and Aruba, providing valuable insights from their fields. Others were Arubans with strong ties to the island, who were eager about sharing their perspectives and engaging in conversations about their homeland.

3.2 Research Instruments

For this research, various research instruments were utilized, including informal interviews, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and participant observation.

To start, I chose unstructured interviews due to the sensitive nature of discussing Dutch colonial history. This approach provided a balance of structure and flexibility, allowing interviewees to express themselves comfortably while enabling adaptation and exploration of emerging topics during the interview. My primary focus was on maintaining a personal connection, which facilitated a holistic and authentic exploration of the subject (Bernard, 2006, p. 213).

Next, I opted for semi-structured interviews to gather more in-depth information for my specific research topic. I used an interview guide to navigate and ensure that all my main inquiries were addressed. This approach ensured consistency in addressing main inquiries across participants (Skinner, 2012, p. 2).

Additionally, I used informal interviews at times when there was little to no structure nor control in the field (Bernard, 2006, 211). As such, the information was compiled through jotted field notes and continuous reflections throughout. This tool often accompanied participant observation.

Furthermore, I organized a focus group, where several interviewees who all were related to the topic at hand, interacted with one another and shared their perspectives and notions. Acting as a facilitator, I guided discussions throughout the session (Bryman, 2012, p. 502).

Lastly, I employed participant observation, a cornerstone of anthropology, as my primary method during fieldwork (Eriksen, 2015, p. 34). It allowed me to collect qualitative data firsthand in various settings such as museums, archives, and events. This direct experience enabled the observation of both presented and omitted aspects of Dutch colonial history in cultural institutions.

3.3 Data collection

The data collection process comprised five steps. Initially, I contacted family members and acquaintances within the research topic to gauge their interest in participation. Then, through the **snowball method**, the scope of reach participants was broadened.

As mentioned, interviews comprised a significant part of the process, including ten semi-structured (each exceeding 40 minutes), one unstructured (over two hours), and two informal interviews. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted online due to distance constraints, while the remainder were face-to-face. The singular unstructured interview was also conducted face-to-face. Informal interviews occurred during the Pakhuis de Zwijger event and a workshop on Caribbean heritage. Additionally, I organized a focus group to review the recording of the Pakhuis de Zwijger event, aiming to observe reactions and personal perspectives.

Participant observation spanned four weeks, during which I visited several museums: Wereldmuseum Amsterdam, Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, and the Haags Historisch Museum. Each featured exhibitions on Dutch colonialism, providing the foundation for my observations. This allowed me to discern the aspects of Dutch colonial history represented, including whether Aruba was mentioned or absent.

Further observation occurred at cultural institutions like the Rotterdam archives, featuring a section on discovering family heritage related to former Dutch colonies. Here, I was able to discern the extent of archival resources of Aruba and its colonial history.

As mentioned, I attended the event at Pakhuis de Zwijger called ‘Rastronan: Aruba’s koloniale sporen,’ held on March 20th, 2024. This event was particularly insightful as the topic directly related to my thesis. It allowed me to witness and engage in discussions while observing the attendees and their interactions.

Lastly, for participant observation, I attended a workshop at Rotterdam’s library on April 17th, 2024. Organized in connection with the Year of Commemoration, this workshop aimed to

teach individuals with ties to the Dutch Caribbean islands on conducting archival research to explore their heritage and family lines. It provided an ideal opportunity for participant observation.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical conduct was paramount in my research. Before interviews, I ensured that all my interlocutors were fully informed about the project, allowing them to make informed decisions about their participation and consent for recording, as consent is key (Bryman, 2012, p. 138).

My research was conducted overtly, meaning that the participants were aware of my role, eliminating any possibility of deception. Additionally, anonymity was respected, with pseudonyms used to protect their privacy.

Lastly, a significant ethical challenge arose in managing sensitive stories shared during interviews, particularly those from family members. Given the delicacy of postcolonial memory, certain moments in the field involved personal narratives that elicited emotional responses. These situations demanded impartiality both during fieldwork and in the subsequent data analysis phase.

3.5 Positionality

For this research, I conducted fieldwork within my own community, providing me with a rather favorable positionality. Jayaseelan Raj (2022) notes that personal connection to the topic enhances understanding of socio-cultural aspects, which could be overlooked by outsiders (p. xii). My positionality, as someone who has lived on Aruba and continues to have familial ties, influences my perspective and deepens my passion for the island, particularly regarding its colonial past and representation. As Esther Anderson (2021) stated, “by centering the ethnographic self in the research process to some degree, it is possible to produce a more nuanced, emotive, and reflexive study that benefits both researcher and researched” (p. 223).

Moreover, my positionality enabled me to access a knowledgeable network, fostering trust and openness during fieldwork. I had the advantage of being able to adjust interview language to interlocutors’ preferences, thereby facilitating the development of rapport (Raj, 2022, p. xii & Bryman, 2012, p. 218). English, Dutch, Papiamentu and Spanish are widely spoken by the island’s population. However, despite this linguistic diversity, I have personally witnessed the unifying effect of speaking in one’s native tongue, underscoring the benefit of language flexibility.

Nevertheless, my positionality might have presented potential challenges, as it could have compromised my objectivity. Therefore, I remained vigilant regarding potential biases, and critically interrogated my own assumptions as an insider, ensuring the impartiality of my research (Raj, 2022, p. xiv).

3.6 Limitations

This research is not without its limitations. As a bachelor thesis, the project's duration was restricted, resulting in a limited amount of data collected, which may not be extensive enough to draw general conclusions. However, this study can serve as a steppingstone for future research.

Additionally, this research project solely focused on representation in cultural institutions, meaning that other potential factors such as education or migration were not taken into consideration. Similarly, considering the time frame, most of the research population consisted of people who are familiar with one another, therefore the data collected might not provide a general representation for all Arubans.

Chapter 1: What actually happened back then?

Historically, Aruba has often been depicted as an insignificant Caribbean island where colonial families rapidly mixed with the native population. However, the presence of slavery is rarely discussed and occupies a marginal position within Aruban historical narratives (Allen, Oostindie & Smeulders, 2023, p. 72). While it is true that slavery may not have held the same prominence on Aruba as it did on Curaçao and other Dutch Caribbean islands, it most certainly was present. By 1849, 21% of Aruba's population was enslaved, and by 1863 nearly 500 enslaved individuals gained their freedom (Alofs, 2013, p. 11).

To set the scene, Aruba is a Caribbean island located off the coast of Venezuela. Before Europeans set foot on the island, much like Curaçao and Bonaire, it was populated by its original inhabitants, the indigenous group called Caquetios. This changed once Spain laid claim to the island in 1499, as they were responsible for the enslavement and deportation of the Caquetio population in 1513 (Bongers, n.d.). Eventually in 1636, the Dutch took over and assigned administration to the West India Company. At the time, Aruba served as breeding grounds for both the trade and food supply of Curaçao, thereby reducing the demand for enslaved labor. Other indigenous groups who had come over to Aruba were granted permission to remain on the island, in return for support with the capture of government cattle (Bongers, n.d.).

Until 1754, further colonization of Aruba was prohibited, leaving its population primarily composed of several hundred natives, a commander, some administrative officials, and sporadically a singular enslaved individual. This changed between 1754 and 1767, when settlers from Curaçao began establishing corn plantations in Aruba to support Curaçao's food supply. Other settlers worked for the West Indian Company or lived on the island with the Company's permission due to strict colonization policies. Yet, the number of settlers increased, especially after 1795 when Aruba's main seaport, Paardenbaai, became a key intermediate port for Curaçao's trade with the mainland (Alofs, 2013, p. 20).

The English briefly governed Aruba between 1807-1816, during which trade, livestock farming, and agriculture were neglected. Nevertheless, the population increased, leading to a rise in the number of enslaved people. After its return to Dutch hands, settler society persisted. The discovery of gold, trade revival, and more liberal administrative regulations made the island

more attractive for further settlement. This marked a new beginning in which the long age of systematic neglect ended (Alofs, 2013, p. 20).

The following 100 years saw three population inflows: settlers, natives, and enslaved individuals. The elite, about 350 settlers and government officials, were the main slave owners. The second class included descendants of white settlers, natives, and previously freed enslaved individuals, and until 1863, the third class consisted of enslaved black and ‘colored’ individuals. During this period, domestic slavery was predominant, with women commonly assigned to domestic roles, while others carried out maintenance work. Due to racial mixing and manumissions, ‘colored’ enslaved individuals and free black individuals coexisted on the island (Alofs, 2013, 85).

This three-tiered social structure was prevalent in Caribbean societies; however, Aruba was unique due to its later colonization and absence of commercial plantations. Aruba was a subordinate island with low prosperity and a vulnerable elite. Its connection to the Netherlands was minimal, with political subordination primarily linked to Curaçao, rendering local governance participation insignificant (Alofs, 2013, p. 85). Additionally, factors such as workload, punishment regimes, and freedom of movement indicated a relatively ‘mild’ form of slavery in Aruba, though this varied by owner. This was due to its small scale, insignificant economy, social control, domestic interactions, and enforcement of rights. Consequently, Aruba never developed a separate Afro-Caribbean class of (former) enslaved individuals, as seen in Suriname and Curaçao (Alofs, 2013, p. 88).

Then, on July 1st, 1863, 480 Arubans gained their freedom. The transition following the Dutch emancipation law was relatively successful, as formerly enslaved individuals integrated into free society. People quickly mixed, eliminating the possibility of a separate class of emancipated individuals, leading to the disappearance of the enslaved group as a separate class (Alofs, 2013, p. 90). Aruba did not develop a strong tradition of commemorating slavery and emancipation. Whether consciously or unconsciously, slavery eventually became a forgotten part of history, resulting in silence on this aspect of Aruban history and culture (Alofs, 2013, p. 90). In contrast, the struggle for Status Aparte, achieved in 1986, continues to be remembered (Cain, 2021, p. 83).

This struggle arose from the 1954 Statute for the Kingdom of the Netherlands, which united the six Dutch Caribbean islands into the autonomous country of the ‘Netherlands Antilles’ (Oostindie & Stipriaan, 2021, p. 9). This move was part of the global decolonization process following the loss of Indonesia. To gradually grant independence to the remaining colonies, the Netherlands developed a “model decolonization” approach, granting the Netherlands Antilles and Suriname more autonomy and participation in the Hague. However, the Statute was implemented during a crisis in the oil sector in Aruba and Curaçao, leading to the 1969 revolt on Curaçao. Aruban elite politicians viewed this revolt suspiciously, linking it to the ‘black power’ movement instead of Aruba’s Euro-mestizo identity (Sharpe, 2005, p. 300).

Consequently, the Arubaanse Volkspartij (AVP), a pro-Dutch right-wing political party, used this momentum to bolster their ongoing campaign for separation from the Netherlands Antilles. The basis of this struggle for Status Aparte was therefore a desire to break free from Curaçao’s centralized administration, aiming to promote Aruba’s distinct insular identity, which aligns more closely to the Latin American mestizo culture, rather than the African Caribbean identity prevalent on Curaçao (Sharpe, 2005, p. 298). This movement brought us to where we are today.

Much of Aruba’s colonial history is based on the information found in colonial archives. This was the result of Aruba being of little importance for colonial trade. Material from other sources such as the Catholic Church or private archives have gone missing over time (Alofs, 2013, p. 11).

Chapter 2: The silence is loud

To understand how Aruba's colonial history is represented in Dutch cultural institutions, I visited various institutions currently dedicated to shedding light on this part of Dutch history. However, Aruba was scarcely mentioned. In this chapter, I will show which aspects of Aruba's colonial past can be discerned or not within Dutch cultural institutions, highlighting how historical power structures continue to play a role in silencing certain parts of Dutch colonial history.

What do they really know about us?

Cultural institutions have the power to preserve or retain social memory and meaning, and can therefore be considered as keepers of memories (Jechandran, 2014, p. 57). Therefore, cultural institutions that are exhibiting information and material on postcolonial memory need to be critically analyzed as to continuously unpack colonial discourses.

One of the first places in which this was done was at an event at Pakhuis de Zwijger, a cultural meeting place, on March 20th, 2024. Marketed online as 'Rastronan: Aruba's koloniale sporen', the event was organized in response to the Year of Commemoration as questions emerged about the extent to which people in the Netherlands are aware of Dutch colonial history and its impact on Aruba. It has been observed that while Suriname and Curaçao often receive significant attention, Aruba is often overlooked (Pakhuis de Zwijger, n.d.). A simple example given at the event explained that Aruba played a role during the Second World War due to its oil refinery, which fueled the Allied forces. Moreover, several Arubans fought during the war, yet most of this remains unknown in the Netherlands. The guest speakers pointed out that this needs to change. While the island knows essentially everything about the Netherlands, the same cannot be said for the Netherlands' knowledge about Aruba.

In fact, several of my interviewees confirmed this. For my first interview, I traveled to the Hague to meet with an old acquaintance, Zoe, who has extensive experience working in the cultural sector, both in the Netherlands and in Aruba. We met at a café in the Hague and sat down to discuss my thesis. She was extremely knowledgeable and eagerly shared her insights and experiences in the field. As I explained the focus of my thesis, she instantly started explaining the history and complexities related to the current representation of Aruba within Dutch cultural institutions. She pointed out that prior to 1986, the year when Aruba gained its Status Aparte, the Dutch Antilles

were represented in the island council located on Curaçao. Before this, the Netherlands referred to the islands as a collective entity, namely the Antilles. “It’s all the same” she exclaimed (Zoe, April 1, 2024, The Hague). And it still is this way. She explained that even after 1986, when talking about the islands people in the Netherlands still refer to just Curaçao.

Zoe: “There is a kind of collective image of the Kingdom of the Netherlands with that part. And then it quickly turns to Curaçao” (Interview, April 1, 2024, The Hague).

This sentiment came up during my interview with Amanda. She, like several of my other interviewees, had migrated to the Netherlands, providing the dual perspective valuable for this research. We decided to meet in Apeldoorn and sat down at a café to conduct the interview. During the interview, I asked her about her views on the representation of Aruba within the Netherlands. Amanda laughed and told me that people often assume she is from Suriname simply because of her physical characteristics, which she did not appreciate. She added that it feels like people automatically categorize people who look like her the same way, assuming they are all from Suriname. She explained that she always responded by saying she was from Aruba, to which people would usually connect it to the Antilles, especially Curaçao.

Amanda: “The Dutch know nothing about Aruba. Sometimes I even think that they know more about Curaçao than about Aruba” (Interview, April 12, 2024, Apeldoorn).

Zoe: “When Aruba gained its separate status, it did not receive any debt forgiveness or anything like that. Curaçao, when they gained their separate status on 10-10-2010, they received 10 million, or I don’t know how much in debt forgiveness. So, they started with a clean slate, and Aruba did not. Aruba is in a better economic position than Curaçao. Aruba has a more stable government than Curaçao. Yet, Curaçao is more well-known and more prominent in the Netherlands than Aruba. Because in my experience in the Netherlands, the fact that we are both Aruban but don’t look like 80% of the people from Curaçao makes us harder to place. It is easier, given the colonial past which involved slavery, which was white and black, to deal with Curaçao” (Interview, April 1, 2024, The Hague).

This background positioning in relation to Curaçao, both within Dutch colonial discourse and in general Dutch society, appears to be a recurring theme through which this part of history is narrated. It could even be argued that the memorability and recognizability of Aruba’s history are

contingent upon the specific frame presented in relation to Curaçao. As Bijl (2012) explains, memorability describes what aspects of the past are remembered by society, shaped by frames that convey and determine what is part of the narrative to be remembered (p. 442). My data emphasizes the position Aruba occupies within Dutch historical narrative, highlighting that the frame presented showcases Aruba in relation to Curaçao, thereby negating an independent position for Aruba within Dutch historical representation. The memory of colonial history maintained within the Netherlands seems to be shaped by the binary roles of enslaved and slave owners, the black and white dichotomy. Since Aruba does not have the same level of homogeneity within its population, it becomes difficult to consider Aruba's role in colonial history. This relates to what Butler (2016) describes as recognizability (p. 31).

This was clearly observed during my fieldwork in various cultural institutions. Both the Wereldmuseum in Amsterdam and Rotterdam had specific exhibitions on Dutch colonial history. Stepping into these exhibits, one is transferred into a world of reflections with a constant emphasis on the importance of learning about colonial history, as it shaped the world we live in today (Onze Koloniale Erfenis, n.d.). I observed mentions of Suriname, Indonesia, Curaçao, and occasionally Aruba. Throughout both exhibits, there seemed to be a geographical division, with different sections focusing on specific areas previously colonized by the Netherlands, positioning Aruba alongside Curaçao.

Notes from observation (April 5, 2024, Wereldmuseum Rotterdam): Aruba is mentioned as it is explained that the carnival on Aruba and Curaçao probably originated in Trinidad and is related to the history of slavery.

Aruba continued to be mentioned alongside Curaçao in areas where they shared historical similarities. However, the opposite was not observed. Curaçao was continuously mentioned throughout both exhibits. Various pictures, material cultural heritage, and even musical instruments such as the Tambú—played not only in Curaçao, but also in Aruba—were displayed. Yet, Aruba was rarely mentioned.

Notes from observation (April 17, 2021, Wereldmuseum Amsterdam): As I continue, I recognize a word in the following section, namely, Tambú. The sign explains that in the 17th century on Curaçao, the enslaved created their own festival and music tradition: Tambú. This is based on west African drum music. Although

it was prohibited until well into the 20th century, the tradition continues to this day (with no mention of Aruba anywhere).

Eventually, I noticed a pattern. In both these museums, Aruba was mentioned in areas where particular topics were discussed. These include: the summer carnival in Rotterdam and its ties to the Caribbean islands, the colonial mode of control through limiting use of native languages, —specifically Papiamentu/Papiamentu for Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao—, and in relation to the oil refinery that operated concurrently with the refinery on Curaçao.

Notes from observation (April 5, 2024, Wereldmuseum Rotterdam): The third, and final, time that Aruba is mentioned throughout this exhibition is in the part about oil. There are two pictures shown, one in Aruba and the other in Curaçao and their respective oil refineries.

Notably, as part of the colonial exhibit in Wereldmuseum Amsterdam there was an area specifically dedicated towards an upcoming section on freedom fighters. The sign states: “Coming Soon: Freedom Fighters main characters in the decolonization of Aruba, Curaçao, Sint Maarten, Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean” (*Onze Koloniale Erfenis*, n.d.). This is interesting as it showcases that the museum is working on incorporating multiple voices in its colonial exhibit, including Aruba.

Now, these findings do not aim to criticize the representation on Curaçao’s colonial history, they merely function as a lens through which I am able to highlight how scarcely Aruba is mentioned within museums.

To broaden my fieldwork, I participated in a colonial tour. Organized by the Haags Historisch Museum, a guide took a group of us through The Hague to educate us on the colonial ties and legacies still present in the city. While walking around the guide shared various facts about Dutch colonial history, specifically in relation to the slave trade.

Notes from tour (April 28, 2024, The Hague): He explains that the West India Company (WIC) went from the Netherlands to Western Africa and then to the port in Curaçao. This is the first time Curaçao is mentioned, but none of the other islands. Curaçao was mentioned a couple of other times again but all in relation to the WIC.

This trend continued on during my fieldwork. On April 17, 2024, I attended a workshop on Caribbean Heritage at the library in Rotterdam, aimed at individuals with Dutch Caribbean heritage interested in their family history. We learned how to search historical archives for family information. However, I found little archival information on Aruba. The teacher explained that archival information is still being uploaded online. In fact, in the spirit of the Year of Commemoration, funds have been allocated to support the National Archives of Aruba, similar to efforts at the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam (Van Huffelen, 2023).

Conclusion

Overall, I noticed that various aspects of Aruba's colonial history are not included within cultural institutions, indicating that a particular form of silence has been ascribed onto Aruba's history. Questioning this is an important endeavor as cultural institutions function as important places of memory which create and uphold historical narratives. According to Trouillot (1995), power structures determine the production of historical narratives that contain "bundles of silences" (p. 27). In this case, one could argue that certain aspects of Aruba's colonial history fall within these bundles as they are excluded from the historical narratives produced in Dutch cultural institutions.

Zoe: "But there is no mutual respect based on equality. That trickles down to how you talk about us, how you represent us, how we are represented, and the space we can occupy, etc. And this ultimately translates to cultural institutions" (Interview April 1, 2024, The Hague).

These silences do not solely concern what is represented in these institutions, but also how societies remember history (Miles, 2019, p. 253). By omitting aspects of Aruba's history, like the presence of slavery or the native population, its significance in the past is diminished, shaping a narrative in which these forgotten facets are deemed insufficiently memorable to be represented. This aligns with the observations made by my interlocutors regarding the limited knowledge Dutch people have about Aruba. It becomes apparent that the restricted representation of Aruba within Dutch cultural institutions shapes the perceptions of people in the Netherlands. This prompts the question of how Arubans believe their history should be remembered, and why. This will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: You Should Do Better, or Should We?

In this chapter, I will delve into how Arubans understand this silence, whether they believe it is important to counteract these silences, and, most importantly, how they believe we can move forward in creating a more inclusive representation.

Where do we stand?

As previously mentioned, several of my interviewees indicated that within Dutch society there seems to be a lack of knowledge about Aruba. People often correlate Aruba with Curaçao, thinking that it is part of the Dutch Antilles, when in reality it is not. The limited representation within cultural institutions further constraints what information is being told about Aruba. As part of my fieldwork, I decided to delve deeper into this matter to acquire insights into how Arubans actually feel about this.

One interview in particular stood out. Lily, a 19-year-old Aruban who moved to the Netherlands when she was quite young, told me about her experience growing up in the Dutch education system. Like with all of my interlocutors, I asked Lily about her knowledge on Aruba's colonial ties with the Netherlands. She expressed that she knew very little. I asked her why she thinks this was the case to which she explained that this part of history is not really taught in history classes. She sighed and said that she actually thought this was a big issue.

Lily: "I actually find it quite problematic that we live in the Netherlands and don't learn about the Netherlands' wrongdoings in the past, like the relationship between the Netherlands, the Antilles and Aruba. Nowhere is it mentioned how these ties came to be. [...]. It sort of indicates that they don't find it important enough to mention" (Interview, April 8, 2024, Amstelveen).

Lily was not the only one who felt this way. During my first interview with Zoe, this notion had already come to light.

Zoe: "There is no knowledge, no history book that delves into who we are as islands. It's more like the Netherlands is a Kingdom, there are six islands, three of which are special municipalities, and three are countries within the Kingdom. And then maybe some data about how many people and that's it" (Interview, April 1, 2024, The Hague).

Additionally, Eduard, an Aruban who has lived both in the Netherlands and in Aruba, shared his perspective on the matter. From his experience, people seem to only associate Aruba with vacations. He explained that people never seem to think about the history of the island.

Eduard: “It gets forgotten. People think Aruba is the paradise with sun, sea, beach, which it is. But there is so much more [...]. It simply is important to know. Then you will get a whole different idea other than just sun, sea, beach” (Interview, April 8, 2024, Amstelveen).

He wearily explained that, in comparison to Curaçao and Bonaire, the situation in Aruba was less pronounced. However, this does not negate the fact that history still occurred. It did, and it deserves to be told.

According to Ximena Vial Lecaros (2022) “history deals not only with the past but also with power, which is woven into the events of daily life that get archived, told, and passed down to constitute history” (p. 154). The significance of silence, particularly concerning Aruba’s colonial history, provides valuable insights for critically exploring and reframing Aruba’s role in Dutch historical discourse. This endeavor is crucial because history shapes our collective memory. Therefore, by denying Aruba a place within cultural institutions, its history is relegated to the past and no longer considered part of our collective memory.

Eduard: “Of course it’s important. You must learn from your history in order to move forward into the future. It’s important, it’s part of your culture” (Interview, April 8, 2024, Amstelveen).

Moving forward

This matter appeared to be a common frustration amongst several of my interlocutors, as they believe that it is important to learn not only about Dutch history but also about the history of the Dutch Caribbean islands. The reasoning for this being that if the Netherlands wants to truly promote itself as a Kingdom consisting of three countries and three special municipalities, it should do so in practice. The islands are part of the Kingdom and should be represented within societal discourse as such, specifically within historical discourse and cultural institutions. They suggested that this could be encouraged through education or further representation in cultural institutions.

Eduard: “They need to talk about it more publicly. [...]. We really don’t have to be in the spotlight here, but why is there more about Curaçao than Aruba? Then you have inequality again. Let’s start with making the history books more detailed” (Interview, April 8, 2024, Amstelveen).

Zoe: “That complicated—because it’s a very complicated—colonial and kingdom puzzle, that doesn’t happen here” (Interview, April 1, 2024, The Hague).

However, many participants pointed out that if one wants to acquire more representation within cultural institutions and historical narratives, much of the work would first need to be done on the island. Some interlocutors even posed the question: if *we* do not really know, how can we expect them to?

I interviewed Arianne, an Aruban working in the cultural sector in the Netherlands, to discuss Aruba’s current representation in Dutch cultural institutions. We were not able to meet in person, but we discussed the matter over the phone. During the interview, Arianne emphasized that to increase Aruba’s representation, efforts to explore Aruba’s colonial history must begin on the island itself before expecting changes in Dutch cultural institutions. From her perspective, it is not a matter of being underexposed, or underrepresented; there simply is not much to share because much of the information has not been told yet. She highlights that Aruba needs to take the lead in this to ultimately improve.

Arianne: “I think if we want to discuss Aruba’s colonial past and Aruba’s existence within a colonial context and how, among other things, the system of slavery existed within it, I think it’s important that we start looking at how we can map that out in Aruba. We have to unpack the history. Then you can start looking at what should also find its place within the entire Kingdom, and especially in the Netherlands” (April 19, 2024, online interview).

However, delving into Aruba’s colonial history on the island proves to be a complex endeavor. As previously explained, much of the information regarding Aruba’s colonial past has been lost over time, presenting a stumbling block for further historical insights (Alofs, 2013, p. 11). Moreover, the information contained within colonial archives is still undergoing analysis (Van Huffelen, 2023). Lastly, despite research efforts focusing on musical traditions, family oral history, and language, these aspects have yet to be fully integrated into the island’s historical narrative (Allen, Oostindie & Smeulders, 2023, p. 72).

Arianne noted that it appears Arubans are reluctant to identify with the history of slavery. Therefore, the greater the distance in self-identification, the more pronounced the detachment from associations with slavery and its repercussions. This reluctance limits advocacy for illuminating this aspect of history, thus laying the groundwork for the limited attention given to this particular facet of the past in Aruba.

Other interlocutors shared this sentiment, noting that they never truly witnessed much discussion on Aruba's colonial history. In fact, some mentioned that the interview prompted them to think about the island's history.

Amanda: "When I think about it now, I find it very sad. Because I was born there. I am Aruban. And yet, I don't know much about the history. We know a lot about what happened here in the Netherlands, but the Arubans, about their own island, about their own history is basically 0,0" (Interview, April 12, 2024, Apeldoorn).

Amanda took this a step further, explaining that the lack of discussion about history ultimately affects one's identity and understanding of their origins.

Amanda: "Essentially, our collective memory is very different because of it" (Interview, April 12, 2024, Apeldoorn).

It is important to note that a society's collective memory reflects the present-day interests of that community (Kidron, 2016). This notion aligns with Arianne's remarks regarding Arubans' reluctance to associate with the history of slavery. As Amanda pointed out, by omitting certain aspects of history, the collective memory of Aruba's past becomes incomplete.

Conclusion

This chapter offered insights into how Arubans perceive the current silence surrounding Aruba's colonial history, their feelings about it, and the necessary steps for improvement. As highlighted, history significantly shapes our collective memory and identity, making representation within cultural institutions crucial. However, my data suggests underlying complexities that require examination, potentially shedding light on why silence regarding Aruba's colonial history prevails in Dutch cultural institutions. These complexities will be further explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: History In Practice

In the previous chapters, I explained how the silences surrounding Aruba's colonial history in cultural institutions influence historical narratives and why Arubans deem it crucial to counteract these silences. Interestingly, it has been noted that much of the work must first occur on the island, prompting the question: has this not happened yet? In this final chapter, I will explore how Arubans remember this aspect of their shared history, its role in their collective memory, and its influences on identity-making.

Do We Remember Our History?

The transmission of historical narratives has an important role in shaping society, highlighting the importance of exploring what is remembered and what is not. Charles Stewart (2017) explains that historical consciousness refers to the historical information that has remained in a particular society's consciousness, noting that this information is open to change over time (p. 1). This is important as what is present within the historical narratives ultimately determines what becomes part of a society's collective memory, which according to anthropologist Carol Kidron (2016) encompasses memory that extends beyond the individual mind.

Since history is a shared aspect within society, I organized a focus group on March 24, 2024, in Aalsmeer, where participants could respond to the recording of the event at Pakhuis de Zwijger. As I started the video, I noticed all five participants were fully engaged with the guest speakers. One interlocutor quickly mentioned they had never learned about this part of history. Pausing the video, I asked for elaboration. Another participant chimed in agreement, explaining that despite growing up on the island, she had only just realized how little she knew about the history. In a defeated tone, she added that she actually felt a bit of shame, having never questioned how little she actually knew about her island's history (Focus group, March 24, 2024, Aalsmeer). Glancing around the room, I noticed everyone nodding in agreement.

Intrigued by this, I decided to include this during my interviews and asked my interviewees what they knew about Aruba's colonial history. Interestingly, most of my research participants responded by stating that they knew very little. One interviewee stood out as she explained that what she knew about her island's history was the result of her own curious nature. Maria, an Aruban raised on the island, explained during our interview in Aalsmeer that she actively sought

out more information herself. When asked why, she simply stated that it mattered because that is where she is from.

Maria: “I believe it is important for both me and my daughter. In Aruba we learn a lot about the Netherlands, but I think it’s equally important the other way around. Growing up there, it’s crucial to learn Aruba and the histories of the other islands” (Interview, April 25, 2024, Aalsmeer).

Like Maria, another interviewee, Gloria, an Aruban who grew up on the island, shared her experience of learning about history in Aruba. Here is what she had to say.

Gloria: “Not much is done about it through education. At least, when I think back to my school days, it wasn’t given much attention. We are part of the Dutch Kingdom. You get a little bit in history class, you learn about the Dutch East India Company, but that’s where it stops” (Interview, April 19, 2024, Aalsmeer).

I inquired about her experiences beyond the classroom, asking whether she had encountered any discussions on the island about its colonial history. After some thought, she quickly replied that she had not seen anything significant. She explained that since Aruba never had any plantations, there are no clear connections to that aspect of colonial history.

Gloria: “In my opinion, in Curacao and Bonaire you come into contact with it much more quickly. Because the plantations are still there, and the slave huts are still there. It is visual, so it is tangible” (Interview, April 19, 2024, Aalsmeer).

This is significant as she refers to sites of cultural heritage as mediums of memory, thereby aligning with the frames described by Butler (2016), which determine what eventually is considered memorable (p. 31). Therefore, without direct visual contact through these vehicles of memory, which preserve memories of the past, aspects of Aruba’s colonial history refrain from becoming fully integrated into the collective memory.

The Effect of Heritage on Identity

The concept of cultural heritage refers to elements such as objects, locations, or practices that pertain to a particular culture or society, thereby also having an effect on national identities (Salemink, 2021, p. 423). Throughout my fieldwork several interlocutors, much like Gloria, mentioned the fact that Aruba never had plantations, thereby relating this lack of tangible elements

to the limited representation on the island about its colonial history. In fact, during my very first interview, Zoe pointed out that Aruba actually does not have many tangible artifacts from that time to present within cultural institutions on the island. As a result, affecting what can actually be presented in the historical museum on the island.

Zoe: “The archives, which are extremely important for the cultural identity, but also more broadly for the general identity of the island, are barely held together” (Interview, April 1, 2024, The Hague).

From her experience, cultural institutions in Aruba are not considered a top priority for funding. This is partly attributed to the way Arubans perceive and connect with their colonial history. She explains that, unlike Curaçao, which has a large homogenous community with a shared history, Aruba’s population lacks such cohesive ties. She referred to Aruba as an “expat island,” highlighting the diverse groups that inhabited the island during colonial times. As a result, the strong visual identity present in Curaçao is not as prominent in Aruba, making it challenging to foster a collective identity and shared memory among its inhabitants (Zoe, April 1, 2024, The Hague).

This notion of a melting pot was mentioned time and time again by most of my research participants. When I inquired about what exactly describes the Aruban identity, people would often refer to a strong sense of pride, but also the multiplicity and diversity of the island. However, as Zoe suggested, having a diverse population makes it challenging when trying to create a colonial discourse. Leo, an Aruban anthropologist and historian, builds on this notion.

Leo and I had our interview on April 11, 2024, conducted online due to scheduling challenges. During this interview, Leo thoroughly explained the challenges and complexities Aruba faces regarding postcolonial memory and discourse.

To start, he explained that Aruba’s colonial outrage has primarily been directed towards its subordination to Curaçao, rather than the Netherlands. As a result, Aruba’s colonial discourse has always been different, generating unique thoughts and emotions. He discussed what he refers to as ‘the colonial divide,’ which encompasses three distinct groups: descendants of enslaved Arubans, descendants of individuals who identify with indigenous heritage, and a group from San Nicolas with a unique connection and identification with enslavement.

Leo: “So that threefold division also makes it very difficult, added with the focus on Curaçao, to be able to speak of a shared discourse or perspective on the colonial past” (April 11, 2024, online interview).

In fact, this trickle-down effect also impacts the discourse in Aruba regarding postcolonial justice, highlighting the unique and complex challenge the island faces in seeking more representation and education about its history.

However, just because it presents a challenge does not mean it should not be pursued. Several of my interviewees expressed their desire to see more appreciation and representation of their shared colonial history. Some, like Zoe, have emphasized that much of the cultural heritage has already been lost and will continue to be lost if efforts are not made to document stories, histories, and conduct further research on this important aspect of their past.

During our interview on April 29, 2024, in Arnhem, Betty, an Aruban who resides between Aruba and the Netherlands, expressed her worries about not knowing her own past. She explained how her granddaughter, who lives on Aruba, had approached her in the past asking about Aruba’s history, but Betty did not have clear answers for her. She emphasized the need for more information about their past to be shared and taught, in order to educate the future generations.

This sentiment was echoed by Michelle, an Aruban who migrated to the Netherlands. During our interview on April 7, 2024, in Aalsmeer, Michelle expressed appreciation for Aruba’s status as a melting pot with a diverse population. However, like Betty, she emphasized the critical importance of documenting the island’s information and culture. Michelle passionately exclaimed that documentation is essential to their identity, as without it, aspects of their heritage risk being lost.

These two statements emphasize the importance felt amongst Arubans to record and learn about their past. These answers indicate the connection between maintaining and preserving cultural heritage as they influence identity-making.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how Aruba’s colonial history is remembered, highlighting that many Arubans describe it as not being part of their historical consciousness or memory. I delved into the complexities present on the island regarding this aspect of history, underscoring the challenges

associated with its limited cultural heritage. However, despite these obstacles, there is a shared desire among Arubans to move forward and integrate it into their broader discourse.

Main Conclusion

At the beginning of this research project, I was inspired by the Rastronan: Aruba's koloniale sporen' event at Pakhuis de Zwijger. While listening to the guest speakers, I felt a surge of motivation to seek justice for Aruba, a country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands that has often been overlooked in discussions of colonial history. I embarked on my research with the expectation of finding clear and concise answers as to why Aruba is underexposed within cultural institutions. However, I discovered quite the opposite.

To start, my research has indeed highlighted the pervasive silence surrounding Aruba's representation within Dutch cultural institutions. Aruba is rarely mentioned, and when it is, it is often positioned in accordance with Curacao, indicating a particular frame in which Aruba is still being represented as part of the Dutch Antilles, despite its separate status since 1986. This prevailing representation suggests a narrative where Aruba's history is deemed unmemorable enough to warrant representation, which in turn influences how people in the Netherlands perceive Aruba. Therefore, my research reaffirms the authoritative role cultural institutions play in shaping a society's collective memory and perceptions.

However, while my interviewees express discomfort and slight annoyance at how they, as Arubans, are perceived within the Netherlands, my data suggests that Arubans believe the initial efforts to address this issue must be undertaken on the island itself. This entails providing more representation and education about Aruba's history locally. Several participants mentioned they had never truly learned or seen any discourse on the island in regard to this past. Therefore, if the goal is to increase inclusion of Aruba's colonial past in Dutch cultural institutions, it must first be addressed on the island. My interlocutors emphasize that Aruba needs to unpack its history and acknowledge its complexities. Once this process is underway, efforts can be made to seek further representation, a step they all believe should be taken.

Yet, this is not an easy process. My data has revealed that representing this aspect of history in Aruba poses several challenges. Firstly, the island does not have many tangible cultural heritages that serve as reminders and confrontations of its past. Moreover, much of the historical information has been lost due to inadequate documentation. Secondly, the island's diverse population comprises specific groups with differing notions and goals regarding postcolonial justice, making collective progress more challenging. Therefore, it is imperative for

Arubans to unite their efforts to encourage further engagement and representation, both locally and in the Netherlands.

Now, since this project is part of a bachelor's program, I could not cover all the data that emerged during my fieldwork. However, one notion is particularly worth mentioning: the concept of silence is often juxtaposed with that of voice. It is typically viewed in binary terms, where having a voice is considered powerful, and silence implies voicelessness by default (Engelenhoven, 2022, p. 10). However, my fieldwork suggests another perspective worthy of exploration: instances where a lack of knowledge inhibits individuals from realizing they have a voice in the first place. Throughout my research, I encountered numerous instances where participants explained they had never previously considered this topic, thus being ascribed a form of silence. This silence does not stem from powerlessness but rather from a lack of awareness. It would be worth researching how this form of silence comes to be and what its potential effects are.

Lastly, it is important to note that although this research was centered on the island of Aruba, there are four other islands within the Kingdom of the Netherlands—Saba, Sint Eustatius, Sint Maarten, and Bonaire—that often remain in the background within Dutch historical discourse and cultural institutions. Thus, it is important that research continues to be done to ensure an inclusive representation across the board.

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